

GEORGE CATLIN: EXPLORER AND PAINTER OF THE MANDAN

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In a time when the majority of the United States' citizens viewed the Native American tribes as savages and a nuisance, George Catlin managed to capture a realistic view of these peoples. Catlin's art is probably the most receptive of the early Native American painters. His paintings demonstrated an understanding and even an appreciation of the native people. In 1837, few people in or outside of the United States had a clear picture of what the tribes of the Plains and the Rocky Mountains looked like. The copious amount of paintings, sketches and materials that Catlin brought back with him give some of the best, and in many cases, the only information about the tribes before the serious interference of Euro-American settlers and the government. For the majority of his adult life, Catlin traveled in the Louisiana Purchase Territory documenting the people through his paintings and his writing. Still, there is no doubt that Catlin believed that the Native Americans were doomed. One of the main motives behind Catlin's work was to document these people before they disappeared or the United States government changed their way of life forever. In many ways, Catlin was the first ethnographer of the native peoples and one of the most successful in capturing the tribes before outside interference.¹ He was willing to paint and describe the Indians accurately. He did not give in to the stereotype of portraying the tribes as bloodthirsty savages. Through his art he attempted to show the American people the reality of the tribes, both good and bad, and doing this became his life's work.

Catlin's childhood and the area he grew up in heavily influenced his opinion of the Indians in later life. Catlin was born in 1796, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania at a time when the people of the area vividly remembered the Indian presence. During the Revolutionary War, the Iroquois, who were allied with the British, attacked in what became known as the Wyoming Valley Massacre. While this was actually a battle between the British and the Americans and their respective Indian allies, the fact that the Iroquois dominated the battle led the Americans to label it a massacre.² During the fighting, Catlin's mother, then aged seven, was taken prisoner by the Iroquois. She was treated well and eventually was released without coming to any harm. While many people lived in fear of this tribe, Mrs. Catlin always believed that they were a decent people. Her time among them was one that she remembered fondly. Catlin's father also had a great respect for the local Indians. A veteran of the Revolutionary War and a lawyer, he had an avid interest in recording some of the Indian's history.³

¹ Kathryn S. Hight, "'Doomed to Perish': George Catlin's Depictions of the Mandan," *Art Journal* 49, No. 2 (Summer): 119.

² Joseph R. Millichap, *George Catlin*, Western Writers Series (Boise: Boise State University Press, 1977), 7.

As a child, Catlin must have heard stories about the Iroquois and other tribes from his parents and this doubtlessly influenced him, but he also had an encounter with an Indian at the age of nine. Catlin and his family moved to Broome County, New York, near the Susquehanna River where there was still a slight Indian presence. When the family plowed their field they often dug up beads, arrowheads and other artifacts of the Indians who had lived there.⁴ When he was nine Catlin was out hunting deer when he met an Oneida Indian, On-O-Gong-Way, who was also hunting. While at first afraid, he realized that the man meant him no harm, and eventually they became friends.⁵ This friendship cemented Catlin's belief that the Indians were not savages and would later be the guiding factor of his interest in other tribes.

This interest turned into a career path when he saw the various chiefs heading to Washington to meet with national leaders. This was especially true of the Seneca chief, Red Jacket, who was an eloquent speaker and considered to be one of the more noble Indians of his time. While his father insisted that he become a lawyer, Catlin always had an interest in art. Seeing these Indians made Catlin decide to become an artist. He studied with Thomas Sully and spent hours examining the famous Peale Gallery in attempts to better his abilities. Catlin knew some success as a miniature painter because of his skill in capturing the character of the person. He also attempted to paint historical works, these were heralded, and Catlin was the first to be named a Pennsylvanian Academician.⁶ From there, he decided to head into the West to document the lifestyle of the western tribes while they remained relatively unchanged by the influence of Euro-Americans.

In the 1830's Catlin traveled to St. Louis. There he met Governor William Clark and was commissioned to paint his portrait. When Catlin told the governor what he wanted to do, Clark became his mentor. The governor set up meetings with Indian delegations that were passing through. Catlin received instruction and advice from Clark about the western territory and the etiquette involved in dealing with the Indian chiefs. Catlin went to treaty councils and painted some of his first works of Indians in their natural setting. Although he went back to St. Louis as winter set in, he had begun the process of documenting the Indian tribes. During the time he was in St. Louis, Clark encouraged his friends to have their paintings done by Catlin to allow him to have some source of income. Because of this support, when he was ready to head west, he set up his headquarters in St. Louis.⁷

That winter Catlin returned to spend the winter with his wife, Clara in New York City. He also traveled to Washington to paint several more Indian delegations that were visiting at

³ Ibid. 8.

⁴ George Catlin, *Rambles Among the Indians of the Rocky Mountains and the Andes*, (London, Gall and Inglish, 1966), 7.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Loyd Haberly, *Pursuit of the Horizon* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), 26.

⁷ George Catlin, *Letters and Notes on the North American Indians*. Michael McDonald Mooney, ed., (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1975), 335-36.

that time. During this time, Catlin accepted as much work as he could with the help of his father. In order to do what he planned, he had to have enough money to supply his expedition and leave his wife, during his absence. He also began a process that he continued throughout his travels. He had made many sketches of the Indians in his travels with Clark, and in the winter, he took the opportunity to finish the paintings in oil.⁸

George Catlin had a number of reasons for wanting to go into the western territories: curiosity, ambition, and, most importantly, his respect for the Indians and his desire to capture what they were like before they were gone. At the same time as Catlin was heading to St. Louis, the federal government was solidifying its Indian policy. On April 24, 1830, the Senate passed the Indian Removal bill, which allowed the government to remove the Five Civilized Tribes to land west of the Mississippi River. On May 26, President Jackson signed the bill into law stating that it would, "provide for an exchange of lands with the Indians residing in any of the States or Territories and for their removal West of the Mississippi."⁹ Over thirty thousand Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Creek and Seminole were moved to land in the Indian Territory over the next seven years.

Scholars looking back at the removal see it as one of the most atrocious events in American History. Catlin joined white Americans of that time in the belief it was only way for the Indians to continue to exist, because the Indians were becoming a vanishing race. Catlin viewed the Indians as inferior or, at least, a less evolved people who could not stand a chance against the Euro-Americans. The scientific thought of the early nineteenth century believed that the Indians were evolved to about the point of the early Britons in the time before Christ. The only way for the Indians to survive was to separate them for their own protection. Andrew Jackson was a believer in this theory. While a renowned Indian fighter, Jackson believed that the land west of the Mississippi could be a safe haven for the Indians.¹⁰ He stated that:

Surrounded by the whites with their arts of civilization, which by destroying the resources of the savage doom him to weakness and decay, the fate of the Mohegan, the Narragansett, and the Delaware is fast overtaking the Choctaw, the Cherokee, and the Creek. That this fate surely awaits them if they remain within the limits of the States does not admit of a doubt. Humanity and national honor demand that every effort should be made to avert so great a calamity.¹¹

⁸ William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery*, (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Press, 1979), 18.

⁹ Hight, 119.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Andrew Jackson, Indian Removal Speech, in William H. Truettner, *The Natural Man Observed: A Study of Catlin's Indian Gallery*, (Washington D. C.: Smithsonian Press, 1979), 18.

This view of a childlike and weak people became common among whites for several reasons. The leading scientists and philosophers believed that the Indians were morally weaker because they could not resist the temptations of alcohol and other white vices. They also accepted that they were physically weaker because of their susceptibility to European illnesses.¹²

This philosophy drove Catlin to document the Indians removal through his paintings and his writings. He did not think that he could save the Indian themselves; what he wanted was to save their culture, through his work. He felt that his paintings would allow the Native people to, "live again upon the canvas, and stand forth centuries yet to come, the living monument to a noble race."¹³

The only way Catlin saw the Indians surviving in anything similar to their original environment was if the government created a national reserve between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains. He wished that everything in the West could be saved: the flora, the fauna and the people so that there would be, "a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world in future ages! A nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty!"¹⁴ While this shows that Catlin was interested in preserving the Indians, it also revealed that he saw them, just slightly, as objects. Their value was in their uniqueness. The idea of preserving the Indians like an endangered species may seem odd today, but to the people of the 1830s, it was a natural extension of Indian removal. The Indians could not exist in white society; in fact they were happier without the interference and complications of European civilization. Therefore, the Indians should be removed where they were free to live as they wanted.¹⁵

With this knowledge of Catlin's thoughts on the Indians, it is extremely interesting to see how he portrayed them in his art and literature. The numerous trips that Catlin made gave him a far better idea of what the tribes were actually like than anyone except the mountain men and trappers who actually lived with the Indians. One of the most important groups that Catlin painted was the Mandan. This tribe had helped the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and was nearly destroyed by smallpox in 1837. Catlin visited the Mandan village, located on the mouth of the Knife River in the Dakota Territory, five years before the epidemic struck. It is worth noting that he felt that the Mandan were a good people and that he considered them to be one of the more noteworthy of the forty tribes that he documented.¹⁶

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Daniel, Tyler, ed., *Red Men and Hat Weavers: View Points in Indian History*, (Fort Collins: Colorado State University Press, 1976), 31.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ John C. Ewers, ed., *George Catlin's O-Kee-Pa: A Religious Ceremony and Other Customs of the Mandans* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 1.

Catlin vividly described the houses, clothing and everyday activities of the Mandan. The only other significant recorded sources of information about these Indians came from the German Prince Maximilian of Wied and Lewis and Clark's journals, but they had distinctly different agendas than Catlin. They recorded the customs of the people from a military and diplomatic perspective, and were not worried about the Indians disappearing. Since Catlin believed that the Indians were a dying breed, his work was an attempt to capture the spirit of a people for the future not their potential value to the United States as allies. Prince Maximilian spent the winter of 1834 with the Mandan and kept a detailed account of his stay while the artist Karl Bodmer painted. Catlin spent the summer with them, and saw and recorded first hand the religious and hunting rituals that Maximilian only learned about from tales that the chiefs had told him.¹⁷

Since Catlin saw many of their religious rituals, including the O-kee-pa, he started off his description by saying that the Mandan were not the only tribe to practice rituals of this kind. This was a yearly creation ceremony that the Mandan believed renewed the tribe. Catlin points out the similarities between the Mandan's creation story and the story of the Ark: the significance of a dove, the destruction of the world, and the saving of the people by their use of a big canoe. While he describes this story in detail he does his best to make sure the reader knows it did not have ancient origins. He did not want to perpetuate the idea that per-historical Euro-Asians had somehow influenced the tribe, rather he attributes the story to a group of Welsh who had settled and assimilated with the tribe in the 1700s, and notes that it was unique to the Mandan. None of the other tribes that Catlin visited had a story that involved a canoe.¹⁸

The O-kee-pa started with the appearance of a man, Nu-mohk-muck-a-nah, bearing a sacred pipe, who opened the medicine lodge for the ritual so that the tribe would not be destroyed. The people were ordered to their wigwams and stay there. Four men who had gone through purifying rituals then cleaned the lodge for the next day's ceremonies. During the cleaning, Nu-mohk-muck-a-nah went to each house and told the creation story to the residents and suggested that they might want to make sacrifices to the water.¹⁹

Catlin's description of the ceremony goes on for pages in beautiful detail. He does his best to describe the ceremony as he saw it. He does not make very many value judgments on what the people were doing. He may have been horrified by some of the self-mutilating "torture" that occurred during the ritual, but he recognized that it was part of the Indian culture no matter how abhorrent it was to his western sensibilities. Catlin realized that these people would be changed forever by prolonged contact with the white man. He probably knew that the days of ceremonies like the O-kee-pa were numbered if the government and religious groups had anything to say about it. His detailed description of the Mandan ritual is one of the only first-hand accounts by a white man in existence. Since the Mandan were

¹⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁸ Ibid., 44-45.

¹⁹ Ibid., 449-51.

virtually wiped out by the smallpox, the unique ceremonies and religious beliefs that Catlin witnessed were never seen again. Catlin's account also is significant because of his artistic ability. Prince Maximillian described what he had been told, but Catlin's left a visual record of what he had seen for future generations.

The Mandan's destruction demonstrated to Catlin that his belief about the future of the Indians was right. The Mandan had been friendly and mostly receptive to the Euro-Americans. Their physical "weaknesses" lead to their downfall. Catlin was grief stricken to hear about the tribe's demise, but in the end he was an entrepreneur. He realized that now that the tribe was gone, the value of his work, both monetarily and historically, had been enhanced. Catlin had gone out with the intention of capturing the Indians in the natural state to make a monument to a vanishing people. At the opening of his gallery, Catlin proclaimed that his art would allow the Mandan to live on and that it would show that they were, "a strange, yet kind and hospitable people whose fate, like that of all their race is sealed; whose doom is fixed to live just long enough to be imperfectly known and then fall before the fell disease or sword of civilizing devastation"²⁰

Catlin also gives a detailed description of their lodges. He stated that the roofs were made of two to three feet of clay that was waterproof and that these roofs were sturdy enough that many members of the tribe used them for family gatherings and look outs. Inside the lodges, the floors had been so worn over the years that they were almost like tile and so hard that it was impossible to break the crust. Catlin was extremely impressed by the size of these structures saying that they could easily hold over forty family members. The house was warmed by a large fire that was a center of activity for the family. They spent much of their time around the fire, "reclining in all the most picturesque attitudes and groups, resting on their buffalo-ropes and beautiful mats of rushes."²¹

Catlin genuinely liked the Mandan people. He went to the Indians to see what they were like in their natural environment and he was not displeased by what he found. He was impressed by their dress calling it "strange and majestic" or "lofty" and, rather typically for an artist, spent a great deal of time describing the ornamentation of quills and fur. He also describes their hairstyles and the general appearance of the people.²² On the whole, he felt that the people back east that studied the Indians by examining the visiting chiefs were being foolish. The Indians were not acting like they would if they were in their home villages.²³

Catlin seemed to be amused and slightly concerned, that initially the women and the shamans of the tribe did not want their pictures painted. They felt that it was a form of magic that cut a person in half. After a time, Catlin convinced the people that his work was harmless and he painted many portraits, especially of Chief Four Bears, whom he described

²⁰ Hight, 120-21.

²¹ Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 142-143.

²² Haberly, 68-69.

²³ Hight, 145.

as majestic. Catlin became friend the friend of Four Bears and he described an occasion when they shared a meal. He notes that he was the guest of Four Bears since it was the custom of the tribes in that area to never eat with a guest but to serve him until he was satisfied. Despite the fact that Catlin could not speak Mandan and Four Bears could not speak English, the two managed to carry on a conversation through sign language and pantomime.²⁴ Catlin was genuinely impressed with the character and comradeship that the people demonstrated in their daily conversations:

With minds uninfluenced by the thousand passions and ambitions of civilized life, it is easy to concentrate their conversation upon the little and trifling occurrences of their lives. They are fond of fun and good cheer, can laugh heartily at a slight joke, examples of which their life furnishes them from an inexhaustible fund, enabling them to cheer their little circle about the fire-side with endless laughter and garrulity.²⁵

One of the things that Catlin did was to try and give the people back in the United States some sort of common ground with the Mandan and the other tribes. He may have felt that the Indians were inferior, but he wanted his kinsmen to be able to identify human qualities in the tribes. In one instance, he described the bedding areas of the tribe. He said that they slept on bedsteads that were very similar to what the people back east used. While this may seem like a trivial detail, it made the people reading the book feel like they had something in common with the tribe.²⁶

While Catlin's written work is important for its descriptions and his opinions about the various tribes that he visited, his paintings and sketches are his most enduring legacy. His gallery of Indian art was the most extensive at that time. Others may have been better artists, but Catlin's work was widely published in the early years of the nineteenth century. Until Fredrick Remington and Charles Russell started publishing their work, it was Catlin's art that was used in magazines and books and was seen by thousands of people.²⁷

Through his art, Catlin attempted to document every aspect of Indian life. Unlike Charles Bird King and some of his own earlier work, his later concentration was not on portraits, but genre paintings. He did paint plenty of portraits and these are often the only evidence that history has concerning the looks and traditional garb of the chiefs and the people as a whole. Catlin painted their houses, their dresses and equipment, how they played and how they lived. In one painting, "Tchung-kee," Catlin illustrated how the Mandan's played a summer game with a ring and a pole. The grass is green and a large

²⁴ Haberly, 71.

²⁵ Catlin, *Letters and Notes*, 145.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁷ Mary Sayre Haverstock, "The Art and Guile of George Catlin," *Americas*, May/June 1983, 2.

group of people are watching as a man throws a stone ring and two others give chase. Catlin gave a description that went along with the painting. He said that Tchung-kee was the Mandan's favorite game and that they played it almost every day on a clay court that the villagers had built nearby. Catlin managed to capture the excitement the people felt and the action involved in the game. He described it as a "beautiful athletic exercise," and his painting showed his appreciation.²⁸

Other notable paintings by Catlin are the ones that capture more of a feeling of the Wild West. These are mostly later works that Catlin made because he realized that people were more interested in the action that they were in the life scenes. Catlin may have been fascinated with the lives of the Indians, but he knew that he had to support himself and his family, so he painted what would sell. Many of these paintings show the Indians hunting, dancing, fighting, and holding councils. In "Death of the White Buffalo" a group of braves approach a white buffalo that they had brought down. As they approach they see that two bears are attempting to take the carcass. Many of these were painted later in his life and show the influence that the European battle and propaganda paintings had on him. His style becomes far more extravagant as he tried to keep people interested in his work. While paintings like this have less historical value, they are beautiful examples of Catlin's work. Through these action paintings, Catlin also hoped to gain more support for the sale of his gallery to the government.²⁹

As Catlin painted and his work grew into a large gallery, he had the idea of selling it to the United States government. This became his dream but it was never to be. The government was dedicated to Indian removal and although he had some powerful friends in the legislature, it never passed through Congress.³⁰ At the end of his life Catlin was forced to sell the gallery to Joseph Harrison, Jr. He could no longer afford its preservation. It was only after his death that the collection was donated to the Smithsonian by Harrison's widow and became one of the nation's treasures.³¹

George Catlin had a profound effect upon the history of western art in the United States. For decades afterwards, artists, journalists, and editors would turn to the works of Catlin when they needed examples of Native American art. His incredible productivity made him an easy resource for anyone to use. He dedicated the majority of his life to compiling almost endless sketches and paintings. His highly publicized gallery and books made him one of the best known and praised artists of his time.³²

Looking back its not surprising that Catlin based his life work upon the tribes of the West. Since his early childhood he had been fascinated by the idea of the "Wild Indian." It

²⁸ Truettner, 266.

²⁹ Ibid., 299-300.

³⁰ Haverstock, 2.

³¹ "Frist Artist of the West," *American History*, October 1994, 14.

³² Ibid.

is to his credit that he was able to get past the stereotype; he showed the Mandan and other tribes as they were, not as his audience may have expected. Although considered more of a performer than an artist during his life, Catlin's paintings, sketches and memoirs managed to catch at least a glimpse of life in the tribes. His conviction that the tribes were doomed may have made him portray the Mandan and others in a more sympathetic light, but the importance of his documentation is undeniable. Almost all of the tribes that Catlin painted were extinct 50 years after his travels among them. Catlin's work is a treasure for historians and the world, through his paintings and sketches, the lifestyle and humanity of the peoples he encountered will be seen for generations to come.